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ABSTRACT

Classroom techniques for teaching Chinese to students in the United States are presented for four areas of instruction: pronunciation; writing; grammar; and culture. A discussion of Chinese phonology offers comparisons with English phonetic patterns and articulation, and advises emphasizing pronunciation of individual syllables. It is also recommended that students be taught the four basic tones before the fifth is introduced, and that teachers not introduce suprasegmentals (contour, pitch) until students can perform four tones in sentences without difficulty. A parallel is drawn between the Chinese ideograph system and the English alphabet system, and it is suggested that characters are best introduced at the same time as the corresponding vocabulary. A method of character de-construction and re-construction is recommended for compound characters, with some attention given to cultural connotations and interconnected meanings of both character elements and compounds. When grammar is taught, emphasis on word choice over grammatical structure is advised. Finally, teachers are encouraged to incorporate cultural factors into language instruction from the beginning. Several games useful in Chinese instruction are noted. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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I. Introduction

Mysteriously, Chinese is often considered one of the most difficult languages to learn. Many students have the desire to learn the language yet they are often advised by their friends, family and many other people to stay away from it. Some students are courageous enough to jump into the pool; however, before they have real contact with the language, they jump out of it again. They never get a chance to learn that their assumptions might be wrong. Is Chinese really that hard to learn? My students often ask me this question. Is it harder than any other language? My answer is definitely a negative one. Chinese is not the easiest language to learn, yet it is certainly not the most difficult one to learn. However, it is a language to which most Western people are not exposed, and that is the real reason why everybody thinks that it is so difficult. People of the U.S. are not used to the sounds, the methods of thinking, the ways of expressing oneself. French, Spanish, or German are not easier to learn, but people of this country have more opportunities for contact with these languages, therefore the sounds are not completely strange to them. Besides the familiar sounds, the structures are similar to the structures of the learners' mother tongue. General thought patterns are shared among all of these Western languages. Chinese does not share familiar features with these languages. Neither do the traditional Chinese teachers' attitude (severe, highly demanding, and unapproachable) and methods (negative reinforcement and rote memorization) help to alleviate the students' fear.

This paper offers some practical methods of teaching Chinese to students of the United States.

II. Methodology

This paper approaches the Chinese language from four aspects: from its pronunciation, from its writing, from its grammar, and from its culture. Each section is

presented with a brief description of the subject and problems that are associated with teaching, then followed by suggested practical teaching methods. The last section is intended to lighten up the seriousness of a classroom and bring out the enjoyable side of teaching and learning Chinese as a second language. Some interesting games are suggested for language educators to adapt in the classroom.

(a) teaching pronunciation

Let's start with oral aspects of Chinese. The Chinese phonetic system consists of 37 syllables. These 37 syllables are categorized according to their positions when in combination. There are 21 initials (I), 3 medials (M), and 13 finals (F). Fourteen out of the 21 initials cannot stand by themselves, the other 7 initials and all medials and all finals can stand by themselves as meaningful sounds. Possible combinations are IMF, IM, IF, or MF. When an initial occurs in a combination it must be in the initial position. As the term indicates, medials generally occur in the middle position of a combination. They can also occur in the initial position of the combination MF and in the final position of the combination IM. Finals have to be in final position whether the combination is with an initial, a medial or both.

Chinese sounds are combined in a more systematic manner than in English. Mandarin Phonetic Symbols system is by far the least confusing phonetic system in acquiring pronunciation since in this system, one syllable is represented by one symbol. Thus, in comparison to English phonetic rules, the Mandarin Phonetic Symbols are much easier and less confusing to learn. Various difficulties arise in the romanized phonetic systems which currently prevail as arise in English. In assigning 26 letters to 37 sounds, it is inevitable that we attribute several sounds to a single symbol. However, due to certain restrictions in combination rules, neighboring sounds can indicate which sound

the questionable symbol represents. This compensates for the inadequacies of romanization.

Five out of 37 sounds are new to English speakers, the rest can be found in English except that Chinese sounds are restricted by their position: an initial has to be in initial position, medials in middle position, and finals in final position; while in English, position does not determine pronunciation. This is one of the difficulties that Mandarin speakers face in learning English. The English learners can produce the sounds without difficulty when the positions of the syllables in English coincide with the position in Mandarin Chinese. If not, then the production must be a conscious effort. At the same time, English speakers have to realize that different positions change the quality of the sounds in Mandarin Chinese.

One of the main differences in articulation between Chinese initials and English consonants is aspiration. In English, voicing is an important feature in distinguishing consonants; in Chinese, aspiration is similarly important. All of the initials can be contrasted by aspiration and non-aspiration.

In teaching pronunciation, it would be advisable that the syllables are learned individually and constantly reinforced. At the introductory level, the teacher must provide the proper pronunciation of each new character for the students and familiarize them with patterns of combining syllables into words. After students familiarize themselves with the sounds and the combination patterns, then teachers can take a purely supervisory role in the process. Thus the students will produce the words by themselves using the method learned in the classroom. If mispronounced, the teachers can repeat the individual sound unit and allow students to try again. This is the same trial and error process by which native speakers acquire new words. Second language learners deserve the same opportunity which native speakers have. Teachers could correct the students by

constantly demonstrating the proper pronunciation. However, allowing students to think and to correct themselves enhances their awareness of the proper pronunciation and feelings of achievement.

It is very important for students to learn to be independent learners. That is to say that they should learn and master the method of assembling individual syllables into meaningful sounds instead of only repeating after the teacher whenever new vocabulary is introduced. Teachers must hold the students' hands in the initial stage, but after the method is learned and reinforced, teachers should let their hands go and encourage them to walk by themselves.

Another important feature of pronunciation is tone. Mandarin Chinese has four distinctive tones and a neutral tone. First tone is a high-level tone, second is a rising tone, third descends then rises, and the fourth descends. There is another tone which does not apply to any specific word, this fifth tone is an unstressed or neutral tone. The 5th tone is used for functional words and other words that are not in the focus position.

The tones are similar to musical scales (Chao, 1967.), except that musical scales are fixed notes which everybody must attain while tones are dependent upon individual vocal level, and vary from one person to another. Everyone should have his/her own basic note and his/her own high note. First tone is high. One maintains the high note from beginning to end. Second tone starts a little higher than one's basic note and smoothly glides up to the high note. Third tone is a contoured tone. It starts from the basic note and goes lower then rises to just above the basic note. The fourth tone is a falling sound, with a curve similar to a high dive. It starts from the high note then takes a sharp drop toward the basic note. The second tone and the third tone can be difficult to distinguish. Second tone starts a little bit higher than the third tone. The emphasis of the

second tone is on the rising part while the emphasis of the third tone is on the lowering part.

After students have mastered the four tones, the fifth tone can be introduced to them. However, do remind students that tone is part of the sound and wherever the character occurs in a sentence, its tone does not change except for minor adjustments. For most learners, this is one of the most difficult features to conquer. In many cases, students have already mastered the tones in single words, yet when they speak, they will use any tones that they can reach. If a character is a first tone, it will remain as a first tone in a sentence. When it is in an unstressed position, its tone is unstressed, yet it doesn't mean that the tone changes. Students should be reminded of this constantly.

It is advisable that teachers do not introduce suprasegments, such as contour, pitch and etc. until students can perform four tones in sentences without difficulty. This author disagrees with Dorothy Chun on when to introduce suprasegments in a language classroom. In her paper, "Discourse Functions of Intonation in Chinese, German, and English," read at Modern Language Conference 1989, Washington D.C., Chun suggested introducing suprasegmentals to students at the stage of introducing sentences since when native speakers interact, suprasegmentals play an important role. I agree that suprasegmentals should be incorporated into the materials, however, it should be postponed until students have fully mastered the tones.

(b) teaching writing -- characters

Before we start to discuss Chinese characters, we must make a distinction between Chinese characters and English words. A single Chinese character is not always equivalent to an English word. Characters (字 dz) are the smallest meaningful units in Chinese, similar to English morphemes. Ci (詞) are the smallest semantic units which are similar to English words. A ci (詞) can be constituted by one, two, or more characters.

In discussing the Chinese writing system, one always immediately assumes that there are ten thousand unrelated characters to learn. This is not true. Chinese characters are similar to the English alphabet system except that the English alphabet consists of twenty-six phonetic building blocks while Chinese consists of approximately two hundred basic semantic building blocks. As a process, the more characters one learns, the fewer new characters one needs to learn. Once the individual parts have been acquired, it is only a matter of assembling them. It is the same as learning English. Knowing the twenty-six letters doesn't make the learner literate. Knowing the twenty-six letters and their assembled forms does. This process is quite similar in Chinese. However, learning characters has a big advantage that learning an alphabet lacks. Chinese characters are semantically oriented. Both pictographs or ideographs represent more directly the concepts behind the words. Phonographic characters are also linked together by their semantic groups: part of the character indicates sound and part of the character indicates meaning. The association between the characters and the meaning is in the character itself. This makes the learning process somewhat easier.

Some instructors believe that there is such a prodigious number of characters to learn that they should delay the process of introducing characters. This delay, they believe, will reduce the enormous amount of learning required in acquiring four skills at the same time. However, I concur with Wang (1989) that characters should be introduced in the very beginning of the classes. Though a child learns to listen and then to speak before learning to read and to write, s/he does not do so in a literary vacuum- in an absence of all written symbols. On the contrary, though the child may not understand the characters, s/he becomes familiar with them well before actually learning to read and to write, since all the written symbols exist in the child's environment. For the same reason, there is no harm in introducing the characters at the same time the students learn the rest

of language. In fact, if the characters are put off, students have to learn the same vocabulary twice which can be discouraging.

In introducing characters, teachers can use an assembling method of putting parts into the proper position to form the characters. Compound characters consist of several basic characters. In this sense, although students are learning one character, in reality they are learning more. For example, the compound character 鐘 (zhong- clock) is actually seven semantic building blocks combined. Thus when learning this single character 鐘, the students can also learn the characters that make it up. The teacher can start from the left, 金 (jin- gold or metal), the right, 童 (tong-child). 童 (tong) can also be broken down to various blocks, 立 (li- to stand or standing), 日 (ri- sun), and 土 (tu- soil or dirt). Evidently, in learning the character 鐘 (zhong), the student is actually learning seven characters in total. 日 (ri) and 土 (tu) can combine to another character, 里 (li- unit for distance). Another example is the character 國 (guo- country), a favorite example of this author. A country has to have a boundary: 口(wei), military force: 戈 (ge), and the people: 口 (kou). The 一 (yi) under the 口 (kou) can be explained as the land within the boundary. It has to be under the 口 (kou) since nobody walks with the land above their heads. This symbolizes what a "nation" means and requires. These semantic building blocks function the same as English affixes and suffixes, except that they are not restrained to specific positions; their position in the combination may vary. Through analytically associating their visual elements, the learning process becomes easier. This process will alleviate the fear of Chinese- Mandarin learners. This encourages students to continue their studies by building different characters into **a web of meaning** and associating them in order to reduce the difficulty of learning a new and unfamiliar language.

(c) teaching writing -- grammar

Chinese grammar is easier than many other languages. Syntactic studies were not general research subjects in China until contact with Westerners in the 19th century (Nakamura, 1964). The aphorism "約定俗成 yue ding su cheng (patterns of language usage are formed by the communities)" demonstrates the Chinese attitude toward structure (Dong, 1940; Cai, 1978). Descriptive is more appropriate in explaining the language than prescriptive. In discussions of style, Chinese criticizes word choice, not grammatical structure.

S + V + O is the basic word order. Semantics is the deciding factor in sentence structure, not syntax (Cattey, 1980). That is to say, there are no fixed or absolute grammatical rules that a sentence must be constructed in a specific manner. Of course, this has to do with the blurring of parts of speech in Chinese. Nouns and verbs are not clearly distinguished. A noun can be a verb if it is used to indicate the action part of the concept and a verb can be a noun if it is used to indicate the state of that concept. For example, the same compound 溝通 (goutong) can infer inter/intra-personal communication or to communicate/to conduct an inter/intra-personal communication. Similar examples are commonly seen in the language.

Since Chinese is not an inflected language, word order is extremely important in a sentence. A sentence is usually arranged in temporal sequence. Subjects go first as the focus of a statement. A "when" must be established for the action to occur, therefore time phrases can go before or after a subject but must be before anything else. When there are both subject and time phrase, the locative phrase follows in the third position. After all these have been established, the action can take place. Then comes the receiver of the action or the sentence, the object. Sentences are arranged with this order in mind. For example, for the English sentence, "I went to the park to play this morning," its

Chinese equivalent one would be "我今天早上去公園玩 (wo jintian zaoshang qu gongyuan wan)"--I this morning to the park to play.

The subject in Chinese has a different definition from an English subject. Chinese subjects are themes, topics, or issues, they are not nouns or pronouns only. Therefore, anything can be in subject position as long as it is the theme or focus of the sentence (Qu, 1986).

Chinese verbs have no conjugation, nouns have no number, and pronouns have no case (Chou, 1955). Verbs do not require tenses because time phrases serve that function. As many people joke, the Chinese remain forever in the present. Nouns do not have a plural form since the number placed in front of them indicates plurality or singularity.

Another difference between English nouns and Chinese nouns is the use of measure words (or classifiers) in Chinese. The measure words are usually decided by the shapes of the nouns that take them. All Chinese nouns have their specific measure words and a measure word can be shared by many nouns. The measure words are placed in front of nouns. Numbers and the specifiers (demonstratives) 這 (je -this) and 那 (na - that) must be placed before the measure words. The proper order is Specifiers + Number + Measure word + Noun.

Functional words, which have no semantic weight and fulfill purely grammatical functions, are represented by single characters. They are independent characters that serve grammatical purposes. For example, 了 (le) indicates completion or realization of a happening whether in the past, present, or future. Another example, 的 (de) indicates possession similarly to English "of" or "`s" or works similarly to the English relative pronouns, how/which/what/when/that. Nouns/ adjectives (modifiers) which are placed in front of "的 de" describe the nouns/adjectives (modified) which are placed after "的 de" - Modifier + de + Modified. Modifiers function much like English relative clauses to

explain the modified which function as the English main clause. To translate the "的 de" structure, one starts from the end of the structure to the beginning and with English relative clauses or "of" structure, one translates from the beginning of the structure to the end.

These simplicities in grammar have made learning English a difficult task for Chinese speakers. However, the simplicity in Chinese grammar doesn't necessarily make learning easier for speakers from more complicated grammatical systems, such as English speakers. The process of learning is just as difficult. English speaking students must go through the process of unlearning the complexities in order to accept the simplicity of Chinese grammar. This is where the teacher must reassure the simplicity of Mandarin Chinese to his/her students constantly.

(d) teaching culture

Some teachers suggest that cultural elements should be reserved for more advanced classes. However, the author agrees with Seelye (1988) that culture should be embedded in language instruction from the very beginning. It is never too early to bring cultural awareness to students in language classrooms. Knowing the structures of a language is not sufficient for foreign language learners to function in the target society. The students must also master the inference, the connotation and the appropriateness of an utterance in the target environment.

Bonin (1982) pointed out in his article that generally five years after a student leaves the language classroom, his language ability usually has faded away yet his knowledge of its people and its culture remains. This, hopefully, will make us, the language educators, think about the proportion of language and cultural materials.

To demonstrate cultural influence on language, color is one of the best examples. In China, red is a blessing, a happy color while white is a funeral color. One would never

wrap a wedding gift in white. It must be in a red shade of wrapping paper. In the U.S., red is a warning color and white represents purity and chastity (Gao, 1984). A wedding gift in silver and white wrapping paper is most appropriate in the U.S. An interesting observation, obviously the traffic light was not designed by Chinese, otherwise, we would probably walk on red and stop on green.

Green clothing for men is not acceptable in China. "A man in green hat" infers that the man's wife has committed adultery. Therefore, any men's clothing industry whose target market is in China, should eliminate green from the production line or at least blend it with other colors so that it is not obvious.

Another interesting example in demonstrating the cultural difference is the famous sentence "你好嗎 ni hao ma." It is a direct translation of English greeting "how do you do/how are you (Shen, 1989)." "你好 Ni hao" can be a greeting in Chinese, however "你好嗎 ni hao ma" is a real question and requires a sincere answer. In English, 'how do you do/how are you' is a greeting term and does not require a literal answer. A native speaker of Chinese would always tend to offer a detailed answer to the English sentence- "how do you do" and a native speaker of American English would be puzzled by his Chinese addressee's hesitation in answering his greeting- "你好嗎 ni hao ma." Of course, with years of usage in this country's language classes, many Chinese who have lived here long have also adopted this English greeting in Chinese.

Woman/man in English is a neutral term. One may introduce a guest of honor by saying, "this woman/man has done so and so" in formal occasions. However, "女人、男人 nu/nan ren (female/male human beings)" when used to refer to a specific person, displays disrespect (Shen, 1989). "男人 Nan ren (man)" is not as offensive as "女人 nu ren (woman)" is. In the U.S. society, to be addressed as a woman is a source of pride for young girls; in Chinese society, it is a disgrace as an unmarried female to be

addressed a "女人 nu ren." "小姐 Xiao jie" is the appropriate neutral term for young females. With two opposite social connotations, second language learners must know the appropriateness of vocabulary in the target environment in order to communicate effectively.

One interesting cultural connotation is that since the sound of giving clock (送鐘 sung zhong) is the same as bid farewell to someone at one's deathbed (送終 sung zhong), it is a taboo to use this object as a gift under any circumstances. While teaching characters, teachers can also incorporate cultural elements into the materials.

These are some examples to display the importance of culture in our language classrooms. If we, the educators, wish our students not only to learn the language but also be able to function in the target society, we must bring our students to a conscious level of awareness from the moment of first contact with the language.

(e) games that can be adapted in the classroom

After students have finished the learning process, instead of regular routine activities such as drilling and repetition, teacher can make use of language games to reinforce and to test if the learning process is completed and at the same time to stimulate the interest of students as well as to demonstrate that learning Chinese does not have to be a boring thing, on the contrary, it is fun and very much alive.

The following games are particularly good for Chinese teaching. Except the third one, all are created and inspired by similar games from popular culture. They are good for recognizing and writing Chinese characters, constructing sentences as well as practicing listening and speaking process. Teachers have to make certain modifications in order to accommodate the teaching process.

Bingo can be used to practice writing new characters covered in each chapter (Yao, 1982). Students choose characters from the specific lessons and fill them in the

Bingo Board. Then the teacher will pick a word from an envelope containing all the new characters of the lesson and read the word out loud to the students. Students have to at least recognize the characters and the sounds before playing.

Another good exercise that can be used to improve character recognition is to take characters apart as indicated above in Section (c) -- Writing, and to give clues to the construction of characters using the phrases that they have learned. For example, 也 (ye) can be described as "他的人沒有了 ta de ren mei you le (his person is gone)", or 誰 (shei), as "雞說的話 ji shuo de hua (chicken's words)", or 鐘 (zhong), as "金色的童子 jin se de tong zi (golden child)." Students not only have to practice listening comprehension but also to picture how the characters are constructed. The puzzles can be based on visual construction, and not only on semantic construction.

A third exercise in recognizing characters is to ask students to change, either add or deduct, a part of character and transform it into a different character (Lin, 1984). The same technique can also apply to pronunciation, change, add, or deduct a syllable in the combination and form a different character. This exercise will help the students strengthen their web of learning.

A fourth exercise demonstrates sentence structure. Students are randomly divided into groups. Matching numbers of sentences are prepared and broke down into several parts and distributed to students randomly. Students are asked to assemble them into meaningful sentences. They have to ask each other for different parts in the language they are learning and work as a group to arrange the pieces for an understandable sentence.

Another useful exercise is to play Pictionary with Chinese sentences. Students pick the sentences which they have to work on from an envelope. The sentences are prepared by the teachers. The person who picks the sentence will draw the concepts for

his/her team to guess and to work it out. The difficult part of this activity is the functional words. In the beginning, teachers might have to offer some hints to the artists so that students can start from somewhere. However, once students are familiar with the game, their imagination will go as far as possible. In order to play this game, students have to recognize the characters and to understand the sentences.

At the paragraph level, a prepared story broken down to sentences is randomly distributed to students. Students have to solve the puzzle of all the sentences and decide how the story goes. The story created by the students will probably differ greatly from the original, and it is fun to compare the two.

For oral practice, singing folk songs or popular songs is a good and interesting method to adapt. However, teachers have to screen the lyrics and the pronunciation of singers. Another popular method is short skits. Students are grouped into several teams depending upon the numbers of the classes. Every team has to work together to create and write a 3-5 minute skit. On the designated date, all the students will act out their skits in front of the class. If a video-recording machine is available, teachers can video-tape the skits, then play them back to the class. Have the Students evaluate one another. This not only will elicit all the vocabulary that students have learned at the time of writing, but also their knowledge of the target culture and society.

These are a few interesting and helpful games that can be adapted in a CSL classroom.

V. Conclusion

Chinese is not a difficult language to learn if we, the educators, can present it more accessibly. Breaking characters and pronunciation down to the basic semantic and phonetic parts are ways to more effectively help our students to learn. As the study done by Wang and Thomas (1992) suggests: self-generate encoding will help students'

retention of characters. As mentioned above, if teachers can help students to build their web of learning, then students will appreciate learning this language more and the chance of their continuing study will increase.

Our language teachers must take new attitudes, new approaches, and new methodologies in order to attract students to the programs and to hold them. Our language program must also be reconstructed from a more realistic point of view. Instead of focusing on how many materials will be covered in a period of time, the focus should be on how well our students can learn the materials, and how to help our students to achieve a functional level of communication which they can continue to grow.

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